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ABSTRACT

Recently, reports on the crisis of the American high school have appeared. Members of the National Association of College Admissions Counselors are high school guidance counselors and college admissions and financial aid officers who work directly with students and families as they move from high school to postsecondary education. As such, they are concerned about these reports. Twenty-five years ago, James Bryant Conant analyzed the crisis facing American high schools and his first recommendation for improving secondary schools was that the counseling system be given strong support because counselors were in the unique position to forge links among all elements of the school community and between high school and college. More current reports either omit any reference to counseling or brush it by lightly. This reflects reality. Counselors have been front-line targets of cutbacks and have been asked to serve as factotums--bus attendants, truant officers, and study hall proctors--rather than being supported to use their expertise to benefit students as they face postsecondary choices. This report presents a series of positive steps which will benefit students and contribute toward excellence. These include suggestions on how and why counseling is of real value, a discussion of the importance of the transition after high school, and thoughts on how to move to a better state for America's youth. The National Association of College Admissions Counselors looks forward to participating in the national effort for change. (Author/ABL)

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National Association of College Admissions Counselors

Counseling: A Facet of Excellence

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This month marks the one-year anniversary of the release of the report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Since that time, NACAC has worked closely with members of Congress, the Department of Education and with other educators to make known our concerns about the role of counseling and counselors in achieving excellence.

Chief among our concerns was that no mention of counseling was made in the national commission's report at all. In the year that has passed since the report was issued, NACAC has made significant inroads to gaining a wider awareness of the important role counselors play in the education of the nation's young people.

Maintaining access and choice in education, while at the same time raising the level of education in this country, are major thoughts brought forth in this paper. NACAC is unique because its members represent public and private secondary schools and colleges and universities. Thus, NACAC is able to forge a critical link between secondary and postsecondary education.

It is our hope that the thoughts and recommendations expressed in this paper will serve as a continuing dialogue between NACAC and our allied groups as we strive together for excellence.

Roger H. Campbell
President
May, 1984

COUNSELING: A FACET OF EXCELLENCE

A PAPER PREPARED BY THE

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS COUNSELORS

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ABSTRACT

The call for reexamination of America's educational goals and needs is not new. Twenty five years ago, James Bryant Conant analyzed the crisis facing American education in The American High School Today. Within the past 12 months, numerous reports on the crisis of the American high school have appeared, including the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education.

Members of the National Association of College Admissions Counselors are high school guidance counselors and college admissions and financial aid officers who work directly with students (and their families) as they move from high school to postsecondary education. As such, we are concerned.

It is ironic that 25 years ago, Conant's first recommendation for improving secondary schools was that the counseling system be given strong support because counselors were in the unique position of being able to forge links among all elements of the school community and between high school and college.

Yet, the current reports either omit any reference to counseling or brush by it very lightly.

NACAC members see this omission as a reflection of what, in fact, has occurred. Counselors have been the front-line targets of personnel cutbacks as school budgets are tightened. They are asked to serve as factotums--as bus duty attendants, truant officers or study hall proctors--rather than being supported to use their expertise to benefit students as they face an array of often confusing postsecondary choices.

This paper presents a series of positive steps which will be of direct benefit to students and, as such, will contribute one facet toward the goal of excellence.

The section "Recommendations for Improving Counseling Services" presents eight concrete suggestions on how and why improved counseling is of real value.

"From High School to College: Standards and Expectations" addresses that point of transition which is so important for individual students, not for collective statistics. The critical point is careful match of student with appropriate program.

Finally, this paper addresses "Effecting Change" with a series of specific thoughts as to how we can move from the current reality to what we perceive to be a better state for America's youth.

No amount of conversation and planning will effect the needed changes unless higher standards become a compelling national priority. The National Association of College Admissions Counselors believes it has a positive contribution to make and looks forward to participating in this national effort.

"COUNSELING: A FACET OF EXCELLENCE"

Twenty-five years ago, in his report, The American High School Today, James Bryant Conant analyzed the crisis facing American education. Americans in the 1950s were beset by the social and economic turmoil following World War II and were feeling threatened from without by Sputnik. Their mounting concern called for a reexamination of the country's educational needs and goals. The focus of Conant's study was the "comprehensive" high school, responsible for educating all, the embodiment of equal opportunity for young people in a democratic society. With the expectation that schools could attain a higher standard of excellence, he clearly and systematically suggested changes in curriculum and school organization.

According to the recently released Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, "A Nation at Risk," the state of American education has reached another crisis. "Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world," the report states, for we have, in effect, "been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament." These are strong and sobering words, reminiscent of the response to the Russians' challenge of a quarter century ago, when young people were found to be similarly ill-prepared for an era of global technological competition. Today's world is described by the report as "one global village"--pluralistic, infinitely more complex, with an ever greater need for "knowledge, learning, information and skilled intelligence. . .new raw

materials for a burgeoning information age." The report details the "indicators of risk," citing especially a decline in tested ability and achievement that has created "a tide of mediocrity devastating to public education." It cites four areas of concern in the educational process: Content (curricula), Expectation (level of knowledge, ability, skill, degree of work, behavior, self-discipline, and motivation), Time (in school, the classroom and homework), and Teaching (preparation, working conditions and teaching, especially in mathematics and science).

More specifically of concern to the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC), whose membership consists of high school guidance counselors and college admissions and financial aid officers, the report says that for some colleges "maintaining enrollments is of greater day-to-day concern than maintaining rigorous academic standards." It recommends that colleges "adopt more rigorous and measurable standards and higher expectations for academic performance and student conduct (by) raising their requirements for admission." Significantly, the report makes no mention whatsoever of the counselor's role in the educational system.

As an association of professionals whose primary purpose is to assist students and their families throughout the school years and in the transition from high school to college, it is imperative that NACAC respond to those aspects of the report that directly affect the counseling role within the broader educational system. In this response NACAC will identify some areas of mutual concern, disagreement, or omissions from the report.

The Crucial Role of the Counselor

Significantly, Conant's first recommendation for improving the secondary school education was that the counseling system be given strong support because, he pointed out, the counselor is in the unique position of being able to forge a link between all the various elements of the school community and between school and college. The counselor stands ready to advocate solid programs, to inform students and parents about educational opportunities, to help solve problems, and to motivate students to higher performance. It is alarming, therefore, that the key role of counseling has been completely ignored by the report, because this omission signals more the declining status and numbers of school guidance counselors than a measure of their worth as valuable facilitators of change within the educational system. The corps of counselors, especially of competent ones, is fast being decimated because they stand at the front line of personnel cutbacks and tightened budgets. Many administrators and planners view counselors as dispensable, with their functions covered by those who have no training in counseling or by teachers with other primary responsibilities.

While Conant conceived of counselors in a preventive role, proactive in their response rather than reactive, increasingly they have moved into maintenance positions, barely staying abreast of the many problems confronting their students. Counselors are being asked to serve as factotums, performing myriad non-essential tasks no other school person cares to perform, from bus duty attendants to truant officers to study hall proctors. They often

are so overloaded with counselees that their energies are siphoned away from important guidance functions by crisis counseling and other fragmented responsibilities. In their attempts to assist students, counselors frequently lack up-to-date materials, adequate information, and important training because school systems lack the incentive and funds to provide these critical supports.

Recommendations for Improving Counseling Services

- The role of counseling should be supported and strengthened not just in secondary schools, but throughout the educational system.

- At a time of increasing stress in the family, when many parents are so engaged with work that they may pay less attention to their children's school programs, when family conflict or problems in communities create anxiety, when the diversity of backgrounds makes decision-making more forbidding than ever before, it is even more necessary to provide a comprehensive school counseling system than it was when Conant recognized the preeminent importance of guidance services.

- A counseling system must be supported throughout the school years by developing an easy, familiar pattern of personal involvement between the student and counselor beginning in the elementary grades. It is at this early stage that a love and interest in language, computation, and other academic skills, and a corresponding curiosity about the natural, social, and cultural worlds needs to be nurtured and fostered by caring and responsible guides. Teachers and counselors must work hand in hand at these

early stages, for the cost of repairing poorly laid foundations is incalculable.

- Counselors should play a significant role in elevating the quality of education in school, as they suggest programs and approaches that meet student aptitudes and interests. Few others in a school can offer students a similarly broad perspective or understanding. The counselor can guide a student into the correct sequences of courses, matching the appropriate degree of difficulty with course load at the junior high level, suggesting the best balance of academic programs and electives in senior high school, investigating the right college programs to complement an emerging interest. A student can do fine work in an excellent high school, with the potential for becoming an outstanding scientist, for example, but that potential will not be realized if he or she is misdirected into a mediocre program in college or not directed at all. Throughout the process good information and guidance is essential for students to make sound choices about courses and wise decisions about future educational plans.

- We know that counselors will be concerned with the needs of students at all levels of ability. Nevertheless, they can be especially helpful in identifying the gifted student early in a school career and setting him or her on a stimulating path of challening programs. Similarly, the counselor is best qualified to identify the student who needs to work at a slower pace and to have remedial help before irreparable damage is done.

- Counselors can be the guardians of a treasured, humane climate in what is often a large and impersonal school, understanding best the world of the child and bringing sensitivity

to the student's need to develop a healthy sense of self-respect. The counselor can help a student keep a program in balance so that he or she can profit from a range of experience during the school year. The counselor can help foster that critical roundedness which leads to a set of wider options and appreciation for the capacity to enjoy a full life. The counselor can help provide special motivation and incentive to encourage students to gain the most from the educational experience.

- The counselor is one of the few people who can keep the whole system together--building bridges between parent and student, teacher and administrator, school board and community as a vital, working partnership.

- In order to perform these tasks completely and satisfactorily, the counselor must be able to work full-time and to have a reasonable caseload of students. The counselor must receive proper, continuing training, to include a knowledge of testing and measurement and of vocational and college possibilities. Most important, the counselor must have available accurate and current information on curricular options in high school, and career and college possibilities beyond school, including up-to-date financial aid procedures, to insure that these options will be possible.

All of these suggestions underscore a compelling need to support the school counselor with money, time, commitment, and an appreciation of the significant role he or she can play in raising student expectation and improving the quality of education in American schools. By showing a lack of concern for counseling through its omission of this particular dimension of education,

the Commission apparently assumes that the school-to-college transition somehow takes place without the aid of counselors or admissions professionals. It implies that by raising standards, the process will take care of itself. Yet NACAC argues that the counselor provides an essential support system for the student and stands as a single, consistent voice in a crowded arena of self-interest and limited vision. There are few who have the same overview, the same unbiased perspective and knowledge of the student to assist in making appropriate matches between student interest and achievement and the available postsecondary opportunities.

From High School to College: Standards and Expectations

The thorny issues of mutual expectation, specifically school preparation and admissions standards, are infinitely more complex. A single viewpoint from an organization so diverse in its membership as NACAC is difficult to state. Even so, there are many common threads of agreement in the response of NACAC members to the Commission's findings, and their recommendations are generated by common observations.

The report more directly addresses issues of transition in its suggestion that colleges should raise admissions standards so that this nation may enjoy not a minimum level, but a "high level of shared education." There are few NACAC members who would argue with that statement. For too long, educational institutions at all levels have relaxed requirements. Schools have increasingly been expected to take on the burdens and responsibilities of the home. At the same time the schools have responded to a society which

seeks to provide greater access and choice for larger segments of the population. Reacting to this array of forces and expectations, secondary schools have dropped their sights for students--producing a conglomerate of decorative courses seemingly "relevant" to the times and the whims of local pressure groups. There is no doubt that we have seen high school curricula "homogenized, diluted, and diffused," and the result is a lowering of the quality of academic offerings. As many colleges have abandoned entry and exit requirements, secondary schools have not been able to sustain their own requirements. The impact on schools is at once apparent--a retreat from traditional course content. Academic time has been edged out as schools have assumed the abandoned tasks of families, teaching driver training, home economics, human relations, and health and sex education, thereby diluting the basic areas of academic preparation. Through a collaboration between colleges and secondary schools, the door of access for increased numbers of the underrepresented must be left open, but the preparation of students to benefit from their new opportuntities must be improved.

The Commission expects that by "tightening up" admissions requirements, schools will be encouraged to provide stronger programs and students to take more demanding courses. Yet different students respond to different incentives; and while some will be stimulated by the challenge, others may be left behind--confused, discouraged and, in some cases, disenfranchised. Even so, there are signs that school systems across the country, such as the one in Atlanta, are making greater demands on students. With more rigorous programs, they are experiencing vastly improved

preparation and performance. Similarly, the University of California system will soon change its entrance requirements to encourage improved preparation by weighting the difficulty of a high school student's courses rather than just the grade.

What is critical is the careful match of individual student with appropriate program; counselors and admissions officers realize increasingly that an important part of their function is helping students find this match. In order that the admissions process work most effectively, these professionals involved in the transition of students from school to college must place the interest of the student above institutional considerations. In fact, this recognition of the primacy of student needs in admissions serves both institution and student because students properly counseled will more easily reach their educational and personal goals. Difficulties with the process often arise when students enter institutions which are inappropriate for them. This disparity results in poor performance, frustration and often failure.

College admissions officers must be encouraged to see their roles as a combination of institutional representatives and student advocates. Colleges which perceive themselves correctly as places of opportunity for the particular groups or types of students enrolled should feel no discomfort with the dual role of the admissions officer. "At risk" are those institutions which insist that the interest of the student is secondary to fiscal exigency and institutional survival.

NACAC hopes that colleges and schools can and will expect more of students at whatever levels of performance they can reasonably

attain. Yet in expecting more, they must not set rigid requirements for students with dissimilar backgrounds. Variations of many kinds exist from school to school, and even within schools or a given subject; French II at one school may encompass something quite different at another. It is not unreasonable, however, for colleges, or groups of colleges, to provide clearer information about expectations for their applicants. Twelve Pennsylvania college deans have recently produced such a statement. This year the College Board has published a very thorough document, Academic Preparation for College, outlining the program that students should expect to have covered in high school. College admissions offices, too, can make their expectations known in the care and honesty with which they distribute information to counselors and students--viewbooks, catalogues, fact sheets, and profiles.

NACAC members uniformly agree that schools should place early and continuing emphasis on basic learning skills; there is less agreement on how this learning should be accomplished, how content should be determined, and what courses should be emphasized. The Commission Report suggests as a minimum "five new basics" (English, mathematics, science, social science and computer science), with two years of a foreign language for the college-bound. The lack of emphasis on foreign language is inconsistent with the report's vision of a "global village" where knowing a foreign language would serve "the nation's needs in commerce, diplomacy, defense and education." Similarly, the report's emphasis on science and technology seems disproportionate when our young citizens have an even greater need to be informed about the

variety of human experience and culture--through literature, language, history, and the arts. Our young people must be able to communicate concisely and to think clearly and critically about political, moral, and social issues, so that our freedoms of choice may be understood and exercised with intelligence. A broader vision of preparation extends the options for students, provides them with the skills to assume leadership positions in society, and takes into consideration the fact that students are engaged in "life-long" learning and enrichment, not simply in a training exercise for eventual employment. Students must know how "to read, to talk, to think, to know, to act, to live." (G. Highet, The Art of Teaching.)

E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (in The American Scholar) suggests that there has been a decline in our pluralistic country's "commonly shared knowledge," and that in order to restore a balance between unity and diversity, we must develop a "common acculturative curriculum." He says this shared "canonical knowledge is inherently necessary to a literate democracy." The development of a set of core courses in secondary schools would make it possible, then, to develop levels of achievement, as demonstrated periodically on standardized testing, at different stages of the learning process, to measure levels of achievement as students show either a need for assistance or a readiness to move on to the next phase.

Core curricula and standardized achievement tests make the job of assessment easier, but they will always present a problem in a society as diverse as ours. However, if a common content of courses could be kept flexible, retaining limited options for

electives and individual differences; if curricula recommendations could remain "descriptive not prescriptive," then there would exist some broad standard for all schools to follow--those schools which have the wherewithall to adhere to established standards and those which strive to attain these goals.

Effecting Change

If the standards at all levels of education are to be raised, consideration must be given to a number of possible avenues for change within the system, some of which have been suggested already in this paper.

- Students must recognize the inherent pleasures and satisfactions of a good education so that they may become agents of their own growth. Education should lead to an enriched and productive life, not simply be a means for passing from one level to the next or for preparing for a specific career.

- Increasing the time spent teaching students, decreasing the number in class, expecting students to do more homework--all should help focus attention on the academic program. However, these adjustments will work only if the quality of teaching is improved, text books are made more interesting and are better written, and students are joyfully involved in their own learning.

- Educators must think with vision about the ways students learn, and devise innovative methods for colleges to evaluate that learning. Surely the effect of decades of television on a learning generation has been profound, suggesting a greater awareness of the senses, a new ordering of the world, and with that, a different "visual" language. We must seize upon the new visual

literacy at an early age and integrate it into the curricular spectrum. Colleges must create ways to recognize this talent in evaluating students for admission. Studying computer science suggests a familiarity with the basic languages of computers; but again, we must determine how this increased knowledge, affecting so many elementary school children now, will change overall course content. Our educational institutions have been enriched in the past decades by the influx of the underrepresented, including women, minorities and the handicapped. How has this variety affected what we teach? What is the impact of a new ethnic awareness on the quality and content of education? It would seem that the Commission has tended to look back to former remedies rather than forward to the possibility of new ways of educating.

- As college admission officers are viewing a changing, shrinking population and an ever-increasing variety of demonstrated skills, they, too, must seek fresh ways to assess applicants. Studies in evaluating student personality characteristics, resulting in new kinds of quantitative testing, and research into matching learning environments with students at different stages of intellectual development--both are new and innovative approaches to the process of evaluating admissions candidates.

- To elevate the achievement of students, teachers must impart a spirit of vitality and excitement in the classroom. The demoralized, bureaucratic climate of schools alienates and discourages students and teachers. Our brightest students must be encouraged by all possible means to pursue teaching and counseling careers, and the caliber of their preparation must be improved,

including the mastery of one academic subject area. Teachers and counselors must be paid on a scale that is commensurate with positions of respect in the community and must be rewarded for the quality of their performance and for the time devoted to their discipline. Most certainly there should be a rethinking of the process that now sees teachers more concerned with contractual agreements and clock-watching than with igniting students' intellectual curiosity in the classroom.

In the end, it is ordinary citizens, parents and non-parents, who must be willing to bear the cost of a strong educational system for all children. Rather than abrogate their responsibility, parents must pay attention to what their children are doing. They must increase their concern and be more forceful in demanding high quality in education for their children. They must exercise more control over course selection, quality of teaching, and time spent developing good study habits.

There is no question about the need for leadership and careful planning if the Commission's proposals are to gain the necessary fiscal support and to be carried out. Leaders must emerge at all levels--from the President of the United States, to the school board member and school administrator on the local level. But no amount of planning will help carry out the changes needed unless there is a galvanizing of national effort, unless higher standards become a compelling national priority. Government and business leaders, educators, families, taxpayers, students--all must be convinced that education is an investment worth making. NACAC believes that it has a contribution to make, and it looks forward to participating in this national effort.

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